

SKILLS OF READING, WRITING AND TRANSLATING IN ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

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INTRODUCTION

The proficiency in different language skills is of utmost importance to students at tertiary level. The amount of reading materials to cover and written assignments to complete is overwhelming for any school-leaver who seeks higher education.

In studies of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), students face demanding tasks of learning subject-matter through English. The cornerstone of ESP is unfamiliar lexis and subject-matter concepts. In order to succeed, students need to develop proficiency in reading, writing and translating from English into their mother tongue and vice versa.

This paper addresses, first, students' attitudes to reading, writing and translating and, second, to self-evaluation of proficiency in these skills. The problem of adequate translation is closely confined to the two skills of reading and writing. The investigation aimed at gathering verbal and written data from the students at university and making informed decisions to ensure effective language learning.

1. BACKGROUND LITERATURE

Some background information on reading, writing and translating skills is reviewed below.

1.1 Reading

There seems to be no extensive research into efficiency of reading skills in the L2. The common sense suggests that this issue in the second language must be understood through the acquisition of literacy in the first language. In other words, it involves "the fundamental psycholinguistic issue of transfer of the abilities that enable L2 learners to utilize knowledge from one language in acquiring literacy in another" (Carson, 1994).

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The investigation of connections between receptive and productive skills in the L2 needs theoretical, experiential and experimental foundation. English language teachers are well aware of the qualitative dependence: well-read learners are better speakers and writers, and better literacy in the mother tongue helps developing literacy skills in the second language. Reading is known to be a complex cognitive activity, and teaching reading skills presents some difficulties. Length of words and sentences in written texts is one of the key difficulties – longer sentences and longer words are more difficult to understand.

Authenticity of reading materials presents serious difficulty to students because no concessions are made to foreign learners who encounter non-simplified content (Harmer, 2001). Reading authentic materials can be extremely de-motivating for students, and negative expectations of reading are often due to previous unsuccessful experiences (Harmer, 2001).

There are various ways of addressing the problem of language difficulty. The most common are pre-teaching difficult or unfamiliar lexis, encouraging learners to read extensively, to train learners in intensive reading, and to teach reading strategies. Skimming and scanning are useful first stages for developing reading skills, when a reader decides whether to read a text at all or which parts to read carefully. To develop an independent reader, a number of other strategies like inferring, summarizing, checking and monitoring students' comprehension, connecting information from different parts of the text, evaluating and fault-finding are necessary. These strategies involve deducing the meaning of unfamiliar words and word groups as well as implications, i.e. not explicitly stated information, conceptual meaning, understanding relationship in the text structure and parts of a text through lexical-grammatical cohesion devices and indicators in discourse, distinguishing facts from opinions.

In the teaching of reading, grammar is often ignored because of many misconceptions about the role of grammar. According to Dudley Evans et. al. (1998), "in reading, the learners' grammatical weaknesses interfere with comprehension of meaning." Alderson (cited by Dudley Evans et. al., 1998) showed that "poor reading in a foreign language is due to in part to poor reading in the L1, together with an inadequate knowledge of the foreign language. Learners need to reach a threshold level of language knowledge before they are able to transfer any L1 skills to their L2 reading tasks."

Moreover, the cognitive processes involved in processing a text cannot be ignored. Learners must be aware of two simultaneous ways of processing a text - top-down and bottom-up. In top-down processing, learners use the prior knowledge to make predictions about the text. In bottom-up processing, learners rely on their linguistic knowledge to recognize linguistic elements – vowels, consonants, words, expressions, etc. (Lingzhu, 2003).

The fundamental process involved in the second language learning is transfer between L1 and L2 literacy skills (Carson, 1994). Transfer of skills is

not automatic, but training students in learning reading strategies can facilitate transfer.

1.2 Writing

An increased professional concern in teaching writing skills has manifested itself by a number of publications in this area since the 1980s. Issues related to the teaching of writing and to the research findings on the writing of non-native speakers are of a particular interest to linguists and teachers, who claim that one of the most valuable and essential skills is the ability to write accurately, briefly and clearly.

There is an obvious link between reading and writing: they are interdependent and reciprocal processes, both are personal and social activities, which naturally intersect in the process of learning (Kavaliauskienė, 2004).

It is claimed that “knowledge of genre is a key element in all communication and especially significant in writing academic or professional texts” (Dudley-Evans et al, 1998). Developing writing skills involves skills of planning, drafting and revising so that the end product is appropriate both to the purpose of the writing and the intended readership. Moreover, “writing is a difficult and tiring activity and usually needs time for reflection and revision, plus a peaceful environment, none of which are generally available in the classroom”.

The productive skill of writing differs from productive skill of speaking. “Writing has to be both coherent and cohesive. Coherent writing makes sense because you can follow the sequence of ideas and points. Cohesion is a more technical matter since here we concentrate on the various linguistic ways of connecting ideas across phrases and sentences” (Harmer, 2001). There are certain conventions that have to be followed in writing. “Such rules and conventions are not written down anywhere, nor are they easy to define. Rules for writing range from the so called ‘netiquette’ of computer users to the accepted patterns or conventions in different genres”. It means that a different level of formality is used, which is sometimes described as ‘distance’ or ‘closeness’. There are a number of reasons why students find language production difficult: students do not have the minimum language to perform a task; there is no spontaneity in writing; the topic or genre might create some difficulties. Furthermore, conventions in one’s native language are frequently non-transferable to a second language (Harmer, 2001).

The ability to summarize comprises important part of writing. In education summarizing is invaluable: learners have to sum up reading assignments, lecture notes, articles, etc. on a daily basis. The ability to write an effective summary might be the most important writing skill. Students need to be able to summarize before they can be successful at the other kinds of writing. The goal of summarizing is an accurate and concise presentation of

the original's key points and ability to generalize. Some learners assume that summarizing a text is a relatively easy task, but essentially it is not, basically because writing involves some complex abilities. Reading comprehension is one of the necessary abilities. In our previous research into reading-writing relationships in ESP by students who studied law and penitentiary activities, three important facts emerged: learners' reading rates are low, both writing and reading involve translating ideas from L1 (or L2) into L2 (or L1), but no statistical correlation between reading and writing skills has been found (Kavaliauskienė, 2004).

Summing up writing strategies in higher education, reader needs to be able to use adequate reading strategies and must thoroughly understand a text, in particular the links between ideas, be able to paraphrase key points, make necessary generalizations and describe accurately key points. Summarizing demands from students the ability to select information. This involves decision taking on how important or unimportant the facts are, and generalize and reorganize information. Common writing mistakes include poor organization, lengthy sentences and words, inadequate content, inconsistent usage, poor page layout, repetition, plagiarism, lack of structure and various grammatical mistakes.

1.3 Translation

Translation was an important part of English language teaching for a long time, but it has been abandoned since communicative methodologies became dominant. Interestingly, although translation was out of favour with English language practitioners, "it has rather stubbornly refused to die in the teaching of languages other than English" (Cook, 2007).

Major objections to using translation in language teaching can be summarised as follows. First, translation does not help students develop communication skills. Second, it encourages to use L1 instead of L2. Third, translation activities may be suitable for students who prefer analytical or verbal-linguistic learning strategies. Finally, translation is a difficult skill which is not always rewarding:

(<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/articles/translation-activities-language-classroom>, 2009).

The benefits of translation activities include practice of all language skills, i.e. reading, writing, speaking and listening. In terms of communicative competence, accuracy, clarity and flexibility can be developed. Translation is a real-life, natural activity which many learners use on a daily basis either formally or informally. Translation is a common strategy used by many learners even if teachers do not encourage it. Discussion of differences and similarities between languages help students understand problems caused by their native language. Developing skills in translation is a natural and logical part of improving language proficiency:

(<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/articles/translation-activities-language-classroom>, 2009).

According to Duff (1989), for the last two decades teachers and students have started to use translation to teach / learn English language (Duff, 1989). Some ideas for classroom approaches and activities are suggested in the online source quoted above. Translation is sometimes referred to as the fifth language skill alongside the other four basic skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing: "Translation holds a special importance at an intermediate and advanced level: in the advanced or final stage of language teaching, translation from L1 to L2 and from L2 to L1 is recognized as the fifth skill and the most important social skill since it promotes communication and understanding between strangers" (Ross, 2000). If students are aware of the differences, language interference, or transfer, and intervention from their own language are likely to be reduced.

Native language use in the English classroom can cause students to think that words and structures in English have a L1 correspondence, which does not exist. Therefore, raising students' consciousness of the non-parallel nature of language allows learners to think comparatively (Atkinson, 1993). The important question is how to reach a balance of the L1 usage in the learning process. It is thought that four factors should be considered, namely, the students' previous experience, their level, the stage of the course, and the stage of the individual lesson (Atkinson, 1993).

There is an opinion that 'rigidly eliminating or limiting the native language does not appear to guarantee better acquisition, nor does it foster the humanistic approach that recognizes learners' identities' (Mattioli, 2004). Translation as a teaching tool needs to take into account a number of different aspects, such as grammar, syntax, collocation and connotation. Uncritical use of translation may give learners insufficient, confusing or even inaccurate information about target language. However good the students are at understanding authentic reading materials, some of them keep mentally translating from L2 into L1 and vice versa. This fact makes teachers of English consider the importance of translation for learning purposes.

2. RESEARCH METHODS AND RESPONDENTS

In this work, students' reported verbal data (through interviews) or written data (surveys) were investigated. Research employed brief surveys, which were designed in accordance with the accepted standards for questionnaires in Social Sciences (Dörnyei, 2003). Questionnaires were administered to all respondents, and the analysis of responses was conducted. Verbal data emerge as a useful research tool, although in some cases certain caution may be required because students may report what they believe the teacher wants to hear.

The participants were 60 students specializing in psychology at Mykolas Romeris University, Vilnius, and studying English for Specific Purposes (ESP). They were predominantly females at the intermediate English levels. The amount of time spent by students in L2 environment was 4 hours per week for 2 semesters, which amounts to about 120 hours of English instruction.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Attitudes to proficiency in reading, writing and translating

The attitudes to proficiency in different aspects of language were examined by administering a specially designed questionnaire. In this part of the paper, only the data relevant to the research in question are presented. Three ranking preferences - unimportant, not sure and important - were offered as assessment of proficiency significance. The students' responses are shown in percentage in Table 1. Percentage is regarded as a tangible way of presenting statistical results.

Table 1. Attitudes to Proficiency in Reading, Writing and Translation Skills. The respondents – 60 students of psychology.

Skill: Reading	Unimportant	Not sure	Important
ESP texts	-	-	100%
Newspapers	15%	25%	60%
Books	40%	10%	50%
Skill: Writing			
Summaries	10%	10%	80%
Essays	10%	20%	70%
Weblog entries	5%	15%	80%
Skill: Translating			
From L1 into L2	-	10%	90%
From L2 into L1	20%	20%	60%

It is seen that majority of students are unanimous in the importance of ESP skills such as reading professional texts (100%), writing summaries and weblog entries (80%) and translating from the native language into English (90%). However, the respondents do not seem to be very interested in reading newspapers or books – 60% and 50%, respectively. Translating into the learner mother tongue is also considered to be less important (60%) than into English (90%). Some clarifications of the findings have come from the individual interviews at the end of each semester. In their interviews, students

usually claim they do not have much spare time or interest for reading either newspapers or books and they do not enjoy writing activities, but feel they have to do their written assignments which are beneficial in the preparation for the exam at the end of the ESP course. Major leisure activities include listening to music or socializing with friends. Learning is not regarded as fun, though.

3.2 Self-assessment of proficiency in reading, writing and translating

In this research, students were requested to evaluate their reading and writing abilities by giving themselves a grade. These results are shown in Chart 1.

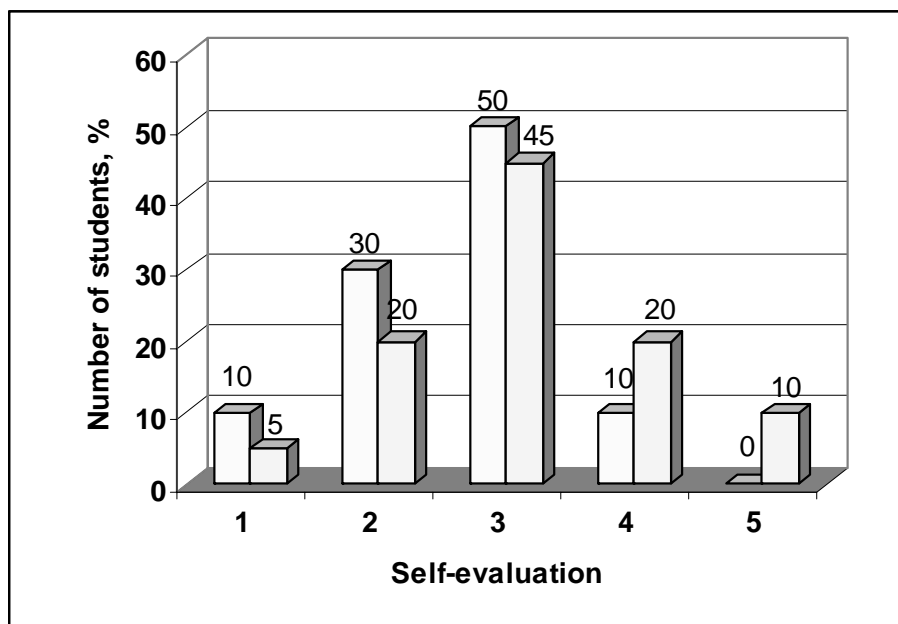


Chart 1. Self-assessment of reading and writing proficiency.

First bars show self-assessed competence in reading proficiency. Second bars show self-assessed competence in writing proficiency.

The meaning of numbers in X axis is: 1 – excellent, 2 – very good, 3 – good, 4 – satisfactory, 5 – weak.

Chart 1 demonstrates how students grade their performance in reading – first columns, and in writing – second columns. All in all, 90% of students evaluate their reading quite well: 10% of students believe it is excellent, 30% – very good, and 50% – good. Only 10% of students think their reading skill is satisfactory. The evaluation of writing skill is not so good. Nevertheless,

70% of students assess it good enough: 5% – excellent, 20% – very good, and 45% – good. The rest 30% of students evaluate their writing skills as either satisfactory or weak.

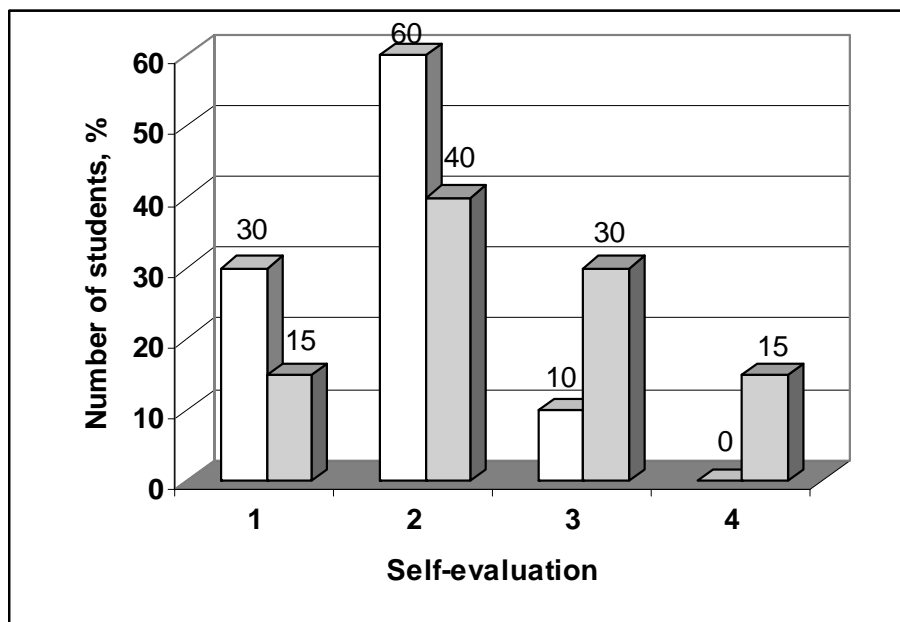


Chart 2. Self-assessment of translation skills. First bars – translation from L2 into L1. Second bars – translation from L1 into L2. The meaning of numbers in X axis: 1 – very good, 2 – good, 3 – satisfactory, 4 – weak.

Chart 2 shows students' self-evaluation of translation skills from L2 into L1 (first bars) and from L1 into L2 (second bars). None of the students believe their translation skills are excellent. However, 90% of students think they are either very good or good at translating from English into their native language (30% and 60%, respectively). Translation from L1 into L2 is more problematic, but nevertheless 55% of students feel they are very good or good at it (15% and 40%, respectively). 30% of students believe their ability to translate is satisfactory, and 15% – weak.

3.3 Performance in reading tests

This aspect of study aimed at establishing links between self-evaluation data and the real facts, in other words, students' performance in reading and writing activities. For this purpose, proficiency in reading was estimated which allows to shed light on the issue.

In order to measure the reading efficiency it is necessary to introduce a standard of value - a reading rate or reading speed. The reading rate is a good measure of ability to process information and is defined as a number of words read per minute. However, reading rate does not provide information about understanding contents of the read materials. Reading comprehension can serve as a measure and it is usually checked by administering questions of various formats, e.g. multiple-choice, true-false, open-ended questions, etc.

A reading test that is available online at the website <http://www.ReadingSoft.com> has been employed. It can be used by anyone who wishes to assess his/her ability to read and understand a text of average difficulty. The participants were requested to read the text and do the exercises. The procedure is quite fast and straightforward. Students click the Start button and start reading a text. The button starts the timer. As soon as they finish reading they click the Stop button. This will stop the timer and displays their reading speed. After this, respondents do the comprehension test, i.e. answer multiple choice questions about the text they have just read. By the end, students' performance is evaluated electronically.

Typical reading rates give a general idea of reading efficiency and are presented below. According to the above website's copyright owners, research shows that reading is about 25% slower from a computer screen than from the paper. Further, reader profiles are given in Table 2.

Table 2. Reader profiles (<http://www.ReadingSoft.com>).

Reading on screen	Reading on paper	Comprehension	Reader profile
100 words per minute	110 wpm	50%	Insufficient
200 wpm	240 wpm	60%	Average reader
300 wpm	400 wpm	80%	Good reader
700 wpm	1000 wpm	85%	Excellent reader

In our online experiment, students' reading rates were within the range between 100 words per min (wpm) and 150 wpm, and the comprehension level was between 50% and 60%. Therefore, according to Table 2, the respondents' profile is ranked as insufficient. It is worth mentioning that before doing this experiment, we evaluated students reading rates in their native language by giving them short professional texts to read and answer some comprehension questions. The findings were much better: reading rates in L1 varied between 200 wpm and 300 wpm and comprehension levels were around 70%. This demonstrates that in their native language students' reading competence places them between average and good readers.

Keeping in mind that the text in the above mentioned online experiment is irrelevant to the students' ESP syllabus, we set a homework assignment. Students were requested to read a few ESP texts taken from the Modules in the coursebook "Understanding Psychology" by Robert S. Feldman as a homework task and to record the time they needed to complete both the reading and comprehension questions. Students' reported information allowed to calculate their reading rates. The findings are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3. Reading rates in ESP assignments.

Type of text	Average reading time (homework)	Number of students, %	Reading rate (homework)	Reading aloud rate (in class)
Coherent, about 1000 words	0.5 hour	45%	35 wpm	60 wpm
Coherent, about 1000 words	1 hour	35%	16.7 wpm	30 wpm
Coherent, about 1000 words	1.5 hours	20%	11.1 wpm	20 wpm

The results in Table 3 show that reading ESP materials at home is rather slow. 45% of learners read at the rate of 35 words per minute, 35% - at 16.7 wpm, and 20% - at 11.1 wpm. In order to find some reliable information why the homework reading rates are rather slow, an experiment of reading aloud was set up. Students were requested to read ESP excerpts of similar difficulty for 1 minute loudly. Reading rates were determined by calculating the number of read words. The average data on reading aloud are shown in the fifth column of Table 3. It is obvious that in the last task the performance is almost twice faster.

Naturally, these results pose two questions. First, why the reading rates are rather slow, and second, why students self-assess their reading proficiency as good or very good, but it is not up to the standards.

One of the possible answers is that in homework assignments students have to carry out some comprehension exercises and they may use bilingual dictionaries for looking up the meanings of unfamiliar words, which is a time-consuming and slows down the reading. This assumption has been confirmed by students' self-reported accounts.

Moreover, in their interviews, students revealed that homework reading has rarely been a non-stop procedure due to various distractions, e.g. phone calls, visitors, breaks for meals, etc., so fixing the time spent on reading may not be accurate. Apart from that, some learners admit that 1) permanent

translation goes on throughout reading process, and 2) reading is hindered by unfamiliar vocabulary, lexical phrases, textual organization, and sentence structure.

The answer to the question why students over-evaluate their reading competence might be that shortcomings in reading are easier to conceal than faults in other language skills. It is assumed that learners perceive reading as a passive procedure consisting of using their eyesight to follow a line after line in a text and ignoring important components of cognition and comprehension.

It is known that the cognitive processing of information is slower in a foreign language and it hinders immediate retention of information. This fact is described by Cook [5]: “cognitive processes work less efficiently through the second language. L2 learners have ‘cognitive deficits’ with reading that are not caused by lack of language ability but by difficulties with processing information in L2”.

3.4 Performance in writing

Writing has always been considered as a very important and difficult skill in learning English. Writing activity compels students to concentrate and organize their ideas and includes students’ abilities to analyze, criticize and summarize what they have read. However students find composing in English difficult because the writing process demands to use various strategies such as cognitive, linguistic, logical, critical, etc. Our students in their interviews, similarly as students elsewhere (Rao, 2007), keep complaining that they lack ideas and cannot think of anything interesting or significant to write. In practice, students feel miserable as soon as they face a task of writing an essay or summary. The most common students’ complaint is ‘I do not even know how / what to write in my mother tongue – it is impossible for me to describe it in English’. Such statements seem to reveal lack of literacy in the L1.

Students’ written work may be viewed in their weblogs which are uploaded in two teacher’s weblogs at the websites:

<http://gkavaliauskiene.blogspot.com> and <http://kavaliauskieneg.blogspot.com>.

Students’ contributions include summaries of ESP texts and essays on various subject-matter themes. It is worth noting that entries of students who studied either social work or law and penitentiary activities can also be viewed and compared with contributions written by students of psychology. It is worth noting that the quality of written work depends on students’ general proficiency. Students’ summaries are usually written in accordance with common requirements to academic writing, while essays often consist of compilations of either online or coursebook materials. References to other people’s ideas or printed materials are not always included in spite of teachers’ reminders to avoid plagiarism.

Similarly as our students in ESP, students in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programmes face considerable challenges in ,reading-to-

write-tasks' (Evans, 2008), because expository texts present a number of difficulties, such as language structures, specialized vocabulary, new concepts. The depth of cognitive processing by the reader is of key importance in the process of comprehension. The successful reading needs the activation of metacognitive reading strategies, i.e. deciding important points, summarizing, making inferences, asking questions (Allen, 2003). The difficulties posed by 'reading-to-write-tasks' are demanding: students are required to analyse, summarize and present critical opinions on the ideas contained in the text.

With the view of improving reading vs writing skills, two approaches seem to be beneficial. One is training students in brainstorming major points in expository texts including the contents and layouts of would be written assignments. Another approach is implementing extensive reading in an ESP programme. According to Macalister (2008), the inclusion of extensive reading was positively received by the learners in the EAP programme.

3.5 Activities in back translation

Ability to translate from L2 into L1 and from L1 into L2 is an essential skill which is closely related to both reading and writing. The students' self-evaluation of their translation skills is displayed in Chart 2. The data demonstrate that the students are aware of the need to develop translating proficiency from the L1 into L2. A possible cause of translation difficulties might be students' inability to retrieve appropriate lexis at the short notice.

The most beneficial activity for developing students' translation skill in ESP has been a "back translation", or re-translation. Different short and not too linguistically complex texts are selected. Students in pairs translate the passages from L2 into L1. Then pairs exchange their versions of translations and different pairs re-translate the passages back into L2. Finally translations from L2 into L1 and back into L2 are examined and compared with the original texts. The ultimate analysis allows students to discuss faults in translation such as lexis, style, language transfer, in other words, to raise individual awareness in the use of language.

CONCLUSIONS

The following conclusions can be drawn. Aiming to perfect learners' proficiency in language skills, first, students' reading rates need to be improved. Second, it might be beneficial to train learners in using metacognitive strategies with the view of improving their performance in 'read-to-write tasks'. Third, seeking better proficiency in translating from native language into English, students need code-switching training in translating activities.

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